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THE TENANT'S RESPONSIBILITY

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WHOEVER first said, "To reform the tenant one must begin with the landlord," made a statement so true that it seems almost a truism.

I am not attempting in the brief time allotted to me to discuss any but the more helpless class of tenants, those with incomes so small as to allow them no choice of living in the suburbs and coming in to work or of moving to quiet residence parts of the city away from the tenement sections of New York and the tenement and alley districts of such cities as Philadelphia and Washington. There are many serious problems for the families of small means as well as for the poor, but these I shall not attempt to take up now.

The landlord's influence, felt through the medium of the house itself and the agent and housekeeper, is one of the first, strongest and most permanent of those brought to bear upon the recently arrived immigrant or the country dweller newly migrated to town.

It is natural that the tenant should form his ideas and ideals partly from what he sees about him. If he comes into the congested section of the city and moves into a badly conducted house he may think that overcrowding and dirt and dark rooms and bad ventilation are an inevitable part of American city life.

He usually responds to such surroundings in one of three ways. Through ignorance, or light-heartedness, or hopeless degradation, he may accept them with cheerfulness or indifference. Or he may accept them because he cannot rise above them and must endure them, but with deep resentment, expressing itself in antagonism to the landlord and his interests. Or, if he has the character and ability and favoring circumstances, he may make himself a new environment. It is the tenants be-

longing to the first two classes who form a part of the vicious circle of negligent landlord and negligent tenant, acting and reacting upon each other.

Here is the case of one very bad tenement house on the East Side. The owner allowed the roof to leak and the building to become so dilapidated in appearance as to wound the self-respect of any occupant. There was no proper provision for the care of the halls, yards and other parts of the building used in common by all the families. The shutters were dropping to pieces, the rain pipes were broken, the fire-escapes were rusted. The walls of the areas were falling down. The balusters of the stairs were broken. The dirty wall paper was falling off the walls of the halls. The earthenware house drain in the cellar, supposed to carry off the waste from the building to the street sewer, was broken and leaking and in consequence the cellar was flooded and very offensive.

Some of the tenants seemingly did not know of anything better and merely lived, apparently contentedly, on a level with their surroundings, which except for the dark, ill-ventilated rooms and halls and the excessive density of population, were probably not much worse than what they had been previously accustomed to, though certainly not of a character to influence them to improve. Other families in the house resented being obliged to live under such conditions. They said the owner didn't care what became of them just so he got the money. They felt it hopeless to try to have a decent and attractive home and became as indifferent as the others. They threw garbage out into the court and yard. They carelessly spilled slops about the sinks, which were in the dark halls and used by four families each. They dragged pieces of wood and boxes for fuel through the halls, breaking the plaster and defacing the walls. They made no attempt to keep the children from whittling and scrawling with crayon and chalk over doors, the walls of the halls and courts, woodsheds and any other available surfaces. The amount of preventable wear and tear, breakage and general damage was enormous.

The landlord, of course, was angry in return and said, "What is the use of doing anything for such people? They would de-

stroy anything." This was a bad house, but I think any one familiar with the tenement districts of the city can readily parallel it from instances seen.

It is interesting to compare with this the story of Miss Collins' houses on Water street, originally of much the same character. Miss Collins, as many of those present already know, took houses of very bad reputation, in a filthy and dilapidated condition. She not merely kept in them the same class of tenants, that is, peddlers, longshoremen and rag-pickers, but actually retained in them nearly all the same families who had been living in the houses before she bought them. She had the buildings renovated throughout. She had the backyards enlarged and the halls lighted. The Tenement House Commission's report on her work says, in speaking of the windows cut to light the halls: "The effect of these windows affords one of the most interesting and instructive lessons to be found in the whole history of tenement-house improvement. Previous to this alteration, the adjacent halls and entries had been intolerably filthy. Sweepings and rubbish had been heaped in the corners under cover of the prevailing darkness, until the place was well-nigh impassable to one whose nostrils were not hardened. The change wrought by the flood of light from the new windows was sudden and surprising. The tenants were shamed by the sights revealed, and without waiting to be asked, hurriedly cleaned the halls and entries.

Miss Collins kept the houses for twenty-two years—abundant time for the enterprise to be thoroughly tested in every way. Without raising the rents during this period the houses brought in an income of $5\frac{1}{2}\%$, not including the increase in the value of the land. Miss Collins expressed herself as thoroughly pleased with the results of her experiment. A complete transformation in the condition of the tenants and in their attitude toward the house was brought about. It is stated that arrests decreased in number, vacant apartments filled up, children withdrew from the streets to the yard, where they found a better playground, the collection of rents became easier, fighting, which had been the rule, became the rare exception.

The tenants took pride in helping to keep the yards and

buildings in good condition. The story is told that on one election night, when a band of revelers started to tear up the cellar doors for a bonfire, an Irish woman, living in one of the tenements, stood on the doors and defied them to touch the house. In nearby places the tenants themselves tore the shutters from the houses in which they lived in order to add to the blaze.

Miss Collins' twenty-two years of successful work with old houses in a bad neighborhood with a rough, uneducated and very poor class of tenants, is one of the best demonstrations that could be asked of the fallacy of the contention of some landlords that it is of no use for the owner to try to do anything for tenants of this type. For the landlord to show responsibility is the best way to rouse the tenant to a sense of responsibility, Miss Collins thought, and for the landlord to do his duty is the best way to stimulate the tenant to do his. And "absent treatment" does not work in the real-estate business any more than in any other. Either the landlord or his representative must know the houses and know the tenants and take an interest in more than the mere collection of the rents.

There are many examples that could be cited to show the effect of the work of the landlord or his responsible representative, the agent or manager, or whoever else may be in charge. I had the privilege, during a year spent in Philadelphia, of seeing improvements brought about by the Octavia Hill Association there in the houses under its control, and this organization has stood the test of as many years as those in which Miss Collins' work was conducted, and also has had to deal with houses originally in bad condition and occupied by very poor tenants. The organization represented by the speaker who is to follow me has to deal almost entirely with a very different and much better class of tenants, I imagine, but certainly some of its houses, which I have had the opportunity to visit, might serve as models of cleanliness.

Not only the landlord and agent, but the much-abused janitor, can do a great deal to hold tenants to their responsibility. We are accustomed to comic stories about the autocratic ways of the New York janitor, his doling out steam heat according to his own sweet will, and his lordly disregard of any humble re-

monstrance on the part of the tenants. But a good janitor can be one of the best influences possible in a house. I have discussed the janitor problem with successful managers of tenement houses in New York city, who have had years of experience, and had them tell me unanimously that they have found that getting a good janitor was half the battle. Miss Collins ascribed the success of her enterprise in large part to the capable head janitor she had for many years, who acted as a resident superintendent.

But if the janitor is to be of assistance in dealing with the occupants of a large tenement building he must not be selected primarily because of his cheapness, nor be made to live in the worst rooms in the house, nor be paid merely by being allowed a small reduction in his rent. In the first place it is rarely possible to get a good janitor for a large building unless he is properly paid and properly accommodated; and in the second place, if he lives in cramped quarters in a dark basement and is known to receive next to nothing for his work, the tenants are likely to have little respect for him and to pay but scant heed to any attempts on his part to check noise and disorder and enforce regard for the cleanliness and repair of the property. If the janitor is to be a real force, he must be a person to whom the tenants will look up, not down.

The landlord and his agent or manager, if he has one, and the janitor strongly influence the tenant, but it must not be forgotten that the tenants also have a marked influence upon one another. If clean tenants move into a house with dirty tenants, they sometimes very quickly acquire as bad habits as the others. There is no public opinion against them, the influence of example is strong, and moreover, if the others spill slops and throw trash about, their individual guilt is not easily detected as it would be in an otherwise clean house. Fortunately, the rule works both ways. I was interested to hear from an excellent model-tenement manager that she had had cases of tenants with a previous bad record for dirt, renting rooms in her clean, well-conducted houses among clean tenants and coming up to the standard at once. I do feel, however, very strongly, that if families show themselves incorrigibly dirty,

in justice to the decent tenants, the landlord should not allow them to remain.

There are many influences constantly at work with the tenement-house families to awaken their desire for good surroundings and their sense of responsibility. The public schools, the school visitors, district nurses, settlement workers, physicians, sanitary inspectors and many others all play their part.

We may well stop to consider what the tenant's responsibility is, what it is that he can and should do to make or keep his surroundings what they ought to be. Perhaps first come matters of cleanliness. I myself have seen a settlement house in which the upper hall was renovated some months ago and was reported then not to have been painted or papered previously for sixteen years, yet it was not apparently much soiled. On the other hand, I have seen rooms smoked, fly-specked and filthy inside of six months owing to the carelessness of the tenants. Rubbish in front areas may be thrown in by passers-by, but if rubbish accumulates in yards, rear areas or courts, while it may sometimes be thrown there by workmen making repairs, or from adjoining premises, still it is the tenants of the building itself who are responsible in most cases. The same is true of the halls. I have known instances where the front doors were not locked and where boys came in from the streets and marked up the walls and where vagrants sometimes took refuge in the passageway and left fragments of meals and other rubbish about, but usually the tenants cause the uncleanness here, and certainly they do in the case of their own rooms, except in the comparatively rare instances where they have a heritage of dirty walls and ceilings left them by previous tenants and a negligent landlord, or where a smoky chimney may blacken rooms through no fault of the occupants.

In matters of cleanliness and also in matters of repair a certain amount of deterioration is normal and unavoidable. Renovation and repairs will always be needed in the best conducted houses. But this amount can be immensely increased through carelessness. Tenants can let children break windows and break plaster and scribble on walls and tear wall paper, and adults may chop wood on cellar floors and break the boards or

concrete and throw unsuitable kinds of refuse into plumbing receptacles with resulting stoppage of the pipes, and boys may go into vacant apartments and cut out lead pipes, and in holiday times may carry off fences, cellar doors and shutters to make bonfires. There is no limit to the ways in which tenants and outsiders coming in can wreck a house if they themselves are wholly indifferent and no restraint is placed upon them.

Overcrowding of individual rooms, that much-discussed problem of New York tenement houses, largely the result of high rents, poverty, lack of adequate rapid transit facilities, long hours of work, location of factories in the congested districts, and necessity for living near the place of employment, is nevertheless continued in some cases after the tenants are able to live under better conditions,—partly from ignorance and indifference, partly from undue parsimony, partly from unwillingness to leave a neighborhood in which they have family or social connections and racial, political and religious ties.

Even light and ventilation, which are partly matters of the construction of the building, are still partly under the control of the tenant, too. I have known two men renting five rooms, four light and one dark, to choose the dark room as a bedroom, and use one of the light rooms for a store-room. One of the men was sick and afraid of a draft. I have known a family having a bedroom with windows to a large yard to nail up the windows for the winter. This family was very poor and had thin clothing and bedding and little money to spend for fuel. But these are illustrations of ways in which the tenant himself may produce the unhealthful conditions from which he suffers.

As to protection against loss, personal injury or death from fire, a very serious responsibility rests upon both landlord and tenant. Casualties may be the result of the landlord's lack of provision of fire protection and fire escapes, or of the tenant's negligence. In the Attorney street fire of 1904 in which fourteen lives were lost, the trapping of the helpless tenants in the flames and smoke was on account of a missing fire-escape balcony. But in the Allen street fire of 1905 in which seventeen people were killed, the cutting off of escape was due to the locking of the door giving exit to the roof and the piling of

wood on a fire-escape balcony, completely filling it up, both evidently the acts of people living in the houses. It must be remembered, too, that in the great majority of cases the fire originally starts through the carelessness of tenants, unless it is one of the incendiary fires which have been shockingly frequent in New York in recent years, but, of course, form no large percentage of the total number. The cases in which the landlord is directly or indirectly responsible for the origin of the fire through permitting improperly constructed fire walls or other apparatus provided by him, or allowing chimneys to become foul, or for any other reason, are comparatively rare. But among the common causes of tenement fires, on the other hand, are careless use of matches, upsetting kerosene lamps, carelessness with candles, placing clothing and furniture too near stoves, and so on through a long list of acts of the tenants themselves.

I was reading only a short time ago an interesting article comparing the per-capita property loss from fire in an English and an American city, and laying the blame for the excess of the latter over the former largely upon the careless habits of the Americans. This is a point on which it is difficult to obtain extended exact statistics, but I have no doubt that the opinion of the writer was at least partly correct, though there are many other factors, such as the differences in types of construction, on which all authorities lay emphasis. The comparison, however, was made not between New York city and London, where the great height of the New York buildings would have to be taken into consideration, but between a small American city and a small English city.

The wide questions of social and moral conditions among tenants and of the bearing of labor conditions, the economic factor and the transit situation upon the tenants' mode of living I cannot touch upon in this short talk. I have merely tried to point out the connection between the responsibility of the landlord and the responsibility of the tenant, and to call attention to obvious matters for which the tenant is responsible, and in which he should be held to his responsibility.

I believe firmly that what the majority of tenants need is a chance, that put in a clean, well-constructed, well-managed

house, they will appreciate their surroundings and make some effort to live up to them. I am not saying that tenants are a faultless class of beings, ready to grow wings, but I do believe that even the poorest in our most congested districts in many cases will respond to efforts to improve their environment, and I think that all credit is due to those who keep clean, attractive houses under seemingly impossible circumstances. I have never forgotten an Italian house I saw in a narrow, dark Philadelphia alley—one of a row of seven buildings which had only one hydrant for the seven—and where the water supply was cut off for a period of over three months so that all the families were obliged to draw water in the yard of a neighboring house, sometimes on wash-days forming in line for the purpose. This was in a crowded, smoky, dusty block in the tenement section of the city. Yet I remember that one of the families had clean scrubbed floors, fresh white curtains and neat white bedspreads and pillowshams. A family that could keep such a home as that in such surroundings could pretty nearly make a heaven out of a pigsty.

It is something of which New York has no reason to be proud that often the first thing a newcomer learns on arriving here is that he must put up with overcrowding, in some cases even to the extent of three to six thousand persons to the single block; and that he must put up with dark, unwholesome, interior rooms to which no ray of direct sunlight can possibly enter. From these "errors of our past crystallized into brick and mortar" the tenant of to-day must suffer.

Let us urge the responsibility of the tenant, but not only that—the responsibility of the landlord and the responsibility of the city as a whole for having permitted the unbearable conditions which have grown up in our crowded districts.